

In 1778, Plymouth's *worst shipwreck* occurred when the American privateer, *General Arnold*, was grounded on White Flats near Plymouth's Twin Lights during the blizzard of December 25th. Lightkeeper Thomas was unable to reach the vessel due to the ice floes blocking the harbor. On December 28th, Plymouth inhabitants built a causeway over the ice to rescue the 36 survivors. Seventy crewmen perished in the freezing water that swept over the main deck of the 20-gun brigantine commanded by Captain James Magee.

In 1778 the armed brigantine *General Arnold* was caught in a blizzard while less than a mile from the light and the captain anchored his vessel rather than risk the treacherous waters of Plymouth's inner harbor without a pilot. The vessel dragged anchor and hit on White Flats. Seventy two of the crew died most of them freezing to death in the below-zero temperature before they could be rescued. The keeper of Gurnet Light was unable to go to their aid because the harbor was blocked with ice. A causeway had to be built over the ice to rescue the survivors.

Plymouth's worst shipwreck occurred over Christmas of 1778, when the American privateer *General Arnold* wrecked in Plymouth Harbor.

The inhabitants of this town were called to witness a catastrophe, truly appalling to humanity. The brig General Arnold, mounting 20 guns, having a crew of 105 men and boys, commanded by Captain James Magee of Boston, sailed from that port on Thursday, the 24th December, found on a cruise. On Friday, anchored off Plymouth harbor, being destitute of a pilot. In the night heavy gale drove her on the White Flat. She soon filled with water... A tremendous storm of wind and snow came on, and a considerable number of men died on Saturday afternoon and in the night...



Mug recovered from the *General Arnold*

On Monday [December 28], the inhabitants passed over the ice to the wreck. Here was presented a scene unutterably awful and distressing. It is scarcely possible for the human mind to conceive of a more appalling spectacle. The ship was sunk ten feet in the sand, the waves had been for about 36 hours sweeping the main deck, the men had crowded to the quarter deck, and even there they were obliged to pool together dead bodies to make room for the living.

70 dead bodies frozen into all imaginable postures were strewn over the deck... Those bodies that were to be deposited in coffins were first put into the town brook; a considerable number were floating on the water, fastened by ropes, that their form might be made to conform to the coffin. But about 60 were thrown into a large pit... on the southwest side of the burial ground.

For more information about Captain James Magee, click [HERE](#).

Shipwrecks

2/5

There were twelve townsmen in the crew of the brig "General Arnold," which sailed from Nantasket Roads on the day before Christmas, 1778, with a total of 105 men aboard.

On Christmas morning she ran into a blizzard, accompanied by wild northeast gales over Cape Cod Bay, and in the hope of riding it out, she dropped anchor off the Plymouth shore. The gale continued, and next day rose to hurricane force, whipping a heavy snowfall before it. The ship began to drag anchor. The crew worked desperately to keep her off the shoals, where she might pound herself to pieces, but it became a losing struggle. Closer and closer she edged inshore, and in Plymouth Harbor, in plain sight of the beach, she struck.

The crew, unable to go below now, were suffering terribly from the cold. Some of them filled their boots with rum, in the hope that it would keep their feet from freezing. That night - December 26 - thirty men were frozen to death, some lying stiff on the deck, some covered by the snow, others washed overboard.

Next morning the gale abated, but the thermometer kept at zero. Those who were still alive were numbed. There was no movement aboard the vessel.

Rescuers were not able to reach the "General Arnold" until the following day - the 28th. By that time the quarterdeck was completely covered by the dead. Only one of the twelve Barnstable men was still alive.

Barnabas Downs was conscious, but he was unable to move. Desperately he tried to attract the attention of the rescue workers as they searched back and forth among the bodies for signs of life. At last - by frantically winking - he succeeded. When he was taken ashore and treated, the heels and toes of both feet had been frozen, and the flesh fell away, leaving only raw stumps.

*Look Arnold
5-24-04*

During the Revolution the towns of Plymouth, Duxbury and Kingston built a fort on the Gurnet. When the British frigate *Niger* fired on the fort, one of the cannonballs pierced the lighthouse building.

One of the most famous New England shipwrecks happened near the Gurnet in December 1778, when the American brigantine *General Arnold* tried to anchor about a mile from the point and struck White Flats. Seventy-two men on the ship perished in the freezing water. The keeper at the Gurnet was unable to reach the vessel because of the ice floes that filled the harbor. Local residents eventually built a causeway to the ship to rescue the survivors.

Hannah Thomas was still keeper at the Gurnet at a salary of \$200 per year when the lighthouse was ceded to the federal government in 1790. Her son, John, did much of the work as his mother grew older, and John was officially appointed keeper later that year. John Thomas remained at the lighthouse until 1812. The next keeper, Joseph Burgess, had a long 39-year stint at Plymouth Light.

The Patriot Ledger

Monday, May 24, 2004

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ARCHIVE

FRIGHT WEEK: The ghostly maiden of White Horse Beach

By LANE LAMBERT *The Patriot Ledger*

PLYMOUTH - She was the beautiful daughter of a respectable Manomet physician. He was a sailor from a Revolutionary War privateer. So no, her father told her. Marriage was out of the question.

But Helen Paine was in love, so she saddled her favorite white mare one night and galloped down to the shore to meet Roland Doane's boat. She was never seen alive again.

So goes the legend of the young woman who gave White Horse Beach its name.

Plymouth has more than its share of hauntings and visitations - faces in shop windows, ghostly figures in Pilgrim alleyways - but the story of the young maiden and her forbidden lover may be of more elusive origin than any of the other tales.

Historians have combed town records for traces of Paine and her father, to no avail. The story of Helen and Roland's romance may be the creation of a 19th century poet. Yet the story endures, still passed down from parents to children.

Whatever its source, the story is rooted in an actual event: the 1778 wreck of the American privateer General Arnold.

The General Arnold had sailed from Boston and was at sea near Gurnet Light on Christmas Eve when a severe storm blew in. Her captain anchored the ship a mile from the lighthouse, furled the sails and put the ship's guns below decks for ballast.

Despite those measures, the ship grounded in the sand of White Flats the next day. When wind-whipped water filled the cabin, the crew fled to the deck, to face a bone-chilling cold that iced Plymouth Bay.

Most of the men died of exposure. Doane, so the story goes, was one of two dozen who was rescued. Dr. Paine took him in, and Helen nursed him back to health in their home.

By August 1779, Roland and Helen had fallen in love, just as he was preparing to return to sea duty. Against her father's wishes, they secretly eloped to Plymouth, were married, and returned before Dr. Paine noticed they were gone.

Doane left for a ship the next day, promising to return for Helen. She laid her plans for a rendezvous.

In the Rev. Timothy Otis Payne's poem, Aug. 24 was the fateful date on which Helen saddled her horse at midnight and rode to the water's edge.

Come back, my daughter! I will no more oppose!" Payne has the doctor cry, when he discovers her empty bed and the empty barn stall. But it was too late. Helen and her steed were cantering across the darkened beach and into the surf, toward Doane's schooner.

White Horse Beach is quiet on the cool evenings of autumn. Beyond the sand the only sight to be seen is White Horse Rock, the rough, oblong outcropping that in recent decades has been dubbed Flag Rock, for the Stars and Stripes emblem that has been painted on the side facing the beach.

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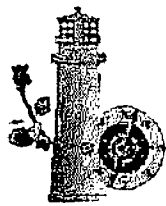
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Shipwrecks 412
**Historically Famous
Lighthouses
CG-232**

This page is from The Coast Guard Wives Website

The information contained in this section is taken verbatim from **HISTORICALLY FAMOUS LIGHTHOUSES - CG-232**. Although the format has been changed slightly for better reading and display. BJ 'n Cindy

PLYMOUTH (GURNET) LIGHTHOUSE - MASSACHUSETTS

One of Massachusetts' two minor peninsulas, extending north and south into the sea between Scituate and Plymouth, extends far south along a great stretch of sand dunes which end at the Gurnet.

In 1606 Champlain landed here and watched the Indians fishing for cod with fishhooks made of wood, on which a spear-shaped bone was fastened. The lines were made of tree bark.

The Pilgrims called the land "the gurnett's nose." The place was apparently named after several similar headlands in the English channel, many of them being called for the fish of that name which is caught along the coast of Devonshire.

The Plymouth (Gurnet) Lighthouse was first established in 1768 by the Massachusetts Legislature. The first keeper was John Thomas on whose land the original lighthouse was built, and for which rent of 5 shillings per year was paid him by the colony. Later Hannah, his widow, was keeper. Both had received \$200 per annum for their services. The lighthouse cost £660 to erect, was 30 feet long, 20 feet high, and 15 feet wide with a "lanthorn" at each end of the building, holding two lamps each.

During the Revolution, the three towns of Plymouth, Duxbury, and Kingston had erected a fort on the Gurnet. In the midst of an engagement between the fort and the British frigate *Niger*, which had gone aground on Brown's Bank, a wild shot from the ship pierced the lighthouse. Later the vessel got off and escaped. The Gurnet Light, however, is thus the only United States lighthouse known to have ever been hit by a cannon ball.

In 1778 the armed brigantine *General Arnold* was caught in a blizzard while less than a mile from the light and the captain anchored his vessel rather than risk the treacherous waters of Plymouth's inner harbor without a pilot. The vessel dragged anchor and hit on White Flats. Seventy two of the crew died most of them freezing to death in the below-zero temperature before they could be rescued. The keeper of Gurnet Light was unable to go to their aid because the harbor was blocked with ice. A causeway had to be built over the ice to rescue the survivors.

In 1783 the damage done to the lighthouse during the Revolution was repaired. In a terrible December snowstorm in 1786, a coasting sloop from Boston to Plymouth was caught off Gurnet. Only one man was hurt when the ship struck a sand bar and all landed safely. Several miles from any habitation two men finally reached Gurnet Lighthouse and Thomas Burgess, the keeper, dispatched his assistant to help the others reach the lighthouse safely.

Under the act of August 7, 1789, the United States accepted cession of the lighthouse by Massachusetts on June 10, 1790, including "the interest of the Commonwealth in the lighthouse land, etc., on the Gurnet Head, west of Plymouth."

On July 2, 1801, the lighthouse was completely destroyed by fire. The merchants of Plymouth and Duxbury erected a temporary beacon at their own expense. On April 6, 1802, Congress appropriated \$270 to reimburse them. At the same time Congress also appropriated \$2,500 "for rebuilding the lighthouse on Gurnet." Twin lights were built and the Thomas family was paid \$120 for the land on which the new lighthouses were constructed.

The Patriot Ledger, Mon., Jan. 5, 1981

Sea And Shore

Gurnet Light

By EDWARD HOWE SNOW

Patriot Ledger Columnist

Massachusetts has two minor peninsulas extending north and south into the sea between Scituate and Plymouth near Brant Rock, Marshfield, and Green Harbor. The northern one, which includes Humarock Beach, terminates at Scituate's Fourth Cliff. The other, of which Duxbury Beach is a part, reaches far to the south along the great stretch of sand dunes which end at the Gurnet.

On a high bluff at the southern tip of the Gurnet, looking out across lower Massachusetts Bay, stands Gurnet Light. First established as a station back in 1768 by the Massachusetts legislature, the lighthouse is on historic land and much of interest has taken place there.



E.R. Snow

During the Revolution, the light itself was hit by a cannonball. And long before, in 1606, Champlain had landed here and made an interesting sketch of Plymouth Harbor for his chart of the coast.

For many years, the Pilgrims called the land "the gurnett's nose" according to lighthouse historian Willoughby. Winsor, the antiquarian of Duxbury, tells us there were about "27 acres of good soil" there.

Incidentally, the name "Gurnet", probably came from one of several similar headlands in the English channel, many of them called the Gurnet after the fish of the same name, which is caught in great numbers along the coast of Devonshire.

In the legislative records of the Governor's Council in the Province of Massachusetts for 1768, we read that a lighthouse was planned in that year to be erected on the eastern extremity of the long strip of land known as the Gurnet at the entrance to Plymouth Harbor.

An unusual arrangement was made with John and Hannah Thomas, owners of the land where the lighthouse was to be built, whereby the province would be allowed to erect and maintain a lighthouse on the Thomas property for the modest sum of five shillings a year!

The mention of a Keeper Thomas and later, his widow, would indicate that the Thomas family was appointed to run the light as part of their agreement with the province.

The lighthouse, constructed at a cost of 6,660 pounds, was 30 feet long, 20 feet high, and 15 feet wide, with a "lanthorn" at each end of the building, each lantern holding two lamps. It was here at Plymouth's Gurnet Light that, for the first time in America, the system of having two separate "twin" lights was begun.

During the Revolution, an unusual incident took place. The three towns of Plymouth, Duxbury and Kingston had erected a fort on the Gurnet. In the midst of an engagement between the fort and the British frigate Niger, which had gone aground on Brown's Bank, a wild shot from the ship pierced the lighthouse itself. The vessel soon got off the sandbar and escaped.

This incident of the cannonball hitting the light house has been mistakenly attributed to two other Massachusetts lighthouses. At Boston Light, there is a small circular window in the tower, which local enthusiasts have claimed, erroneously, was caused by a cannonball.

And on Thacher's Island off Cape Ann, some persons have insisted that one of the twin lights there was struck by a cannonball. As a matter of fact, Gurnet Light Station is the only Massachusetts lighthouse known to have been hit by an enemy cannonball.

A terrible shipwreck occurred near the Gurnet Light during the last week of 1778, when the armed brigantine General Arnold was caught in a blizzard. Although less than a mile from the friendly gleam of the Gurnet Light, Captain Magee anchored his vessel rather than risk the treacherous waters of Plymouth's inner harbor without a pilot.

The vessel dragged anchor and finally hit on White Flats. Before the survivors could eventually be rescued, 72 of the crew died, most of them by freezing to death in the below-zero temperature. Because of the ice-blocked harbor, the keeper of the Gurnet Light was unable to go to their aid, nor could the men of Plymouth reach them. Finally, a causeway was built out over the ice from Plymouth to rescue the survivors.

When Massachusetts ceded the Gurnet Light to the federal government in 1790, the keeper, Mrs. Hannah Thomas, was still active and receiving her yearly rental of five shillings, plus \$200 in pay.

The Gurnet Light was rebuilt in 1843. The structures were distinctive, their two high octagonal towers having the general appearance of Nix's Male Beacon in Boston Harbor.

By 1871 the lights then in the twin towers were compared unfavorably to the lights of an ordinary dwelling house. A short time later the power of Gurnet Light was increased.

The Gurnet Light was an important beacon during the long period when Plymouth Harbor was a thriving seacoast port. Then commerce dropped off, and Plymouth lost most of its sea traffic. In 1914, however, the Cape Cod Canal brought the lighthouse back into importance as a coastal beacon between Boston and New York.

In 1924, the Northeast tower of the Gurnet Light was discontinued, closing a period of 156 years when twin lights had been the Gurnet characteristic.